

Naturalist Notebook

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NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

NOVEMBER 1969

VOLUME V

NO. 11

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Photo by J. Walker

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ACTIVITIES FOR OCTOBER

..... Inside back cover.

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NOVEMBER

The Month Of Stillness

Photo by R. Dewire

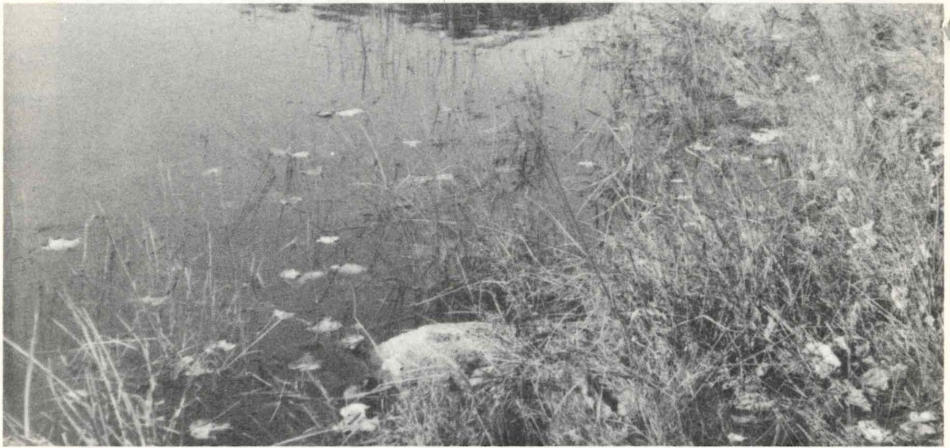


November is the month of stillness. Walk through the woods during this month and see what I mean. The trees are leafless and still with only the clicking of bare branches hitting one another as the wind blows. Flowers are gone as the root systems or seeds lie dormant until next spring. Occasionally in a warm sheltered spot one may find an aster or other fall wildflower still in bloom.

The rustle of leaves under your feet as you walk is by far the loudest noise you will hear. If you stop and listen, you may continue to hear a rustling of leaves and wonder who or what is making the noise. Often it is a white-throat or fox sparrow kicking up the leaves looking for food.

The songs of many birds heard up to now are gone. Except for an occasional chickadee's call, the "jay jay" of a blue jay, or the "caw caw" of a crow, all is silent in the woods. Squirrels may still be seen but they are too busy storing food to make any noise. The insects are also gone. Killed by cold weather, hibernating, or having flown south, they leave behind a quiet woodland without chirping crickets, katydids, and buzzing cicadas.

Photo by R. Dewire



Go to a pond and see how still it is. Just a short while ago, swallows darted over the water catching insects. Dragonflies and damselflies were common along the edge. Water lilies were in flower in the middle as were pickerel weeds and arrowheads along the shore. Now a thin layer of ice replaces the frogs' heads that stuck out and the numbers of water insects that swam along the surface. Out in the middle, the rocks that were once covered with turtles are bare and most of the lily pads have sunk to the bottom. To look at the bright blue water makes you shiver just thinking of how cold it is.

So we have now come to the beginning of winter -- the time of year when Nature prepares to rest. It is a most peaceful time to take a walk in the out-of-doors.

NOVEMBER'S NATURE CALENDAR

November is the month of fallen leaves and honking geese.

Nov. 3... Purple Sandpipers--our winter shorebird--arrive along the coast.

Nov. 4... Hooded Mergansers are arriving in coves and lakes.

Nov. 6... Spectacular flocks of Evening Grosbeaks were at many feeders by this time last year.

Nov. 7... Rough-legged Hawks come down from Canada to winter along the coast.

Nov. 11... Snow Buntings--looking like flakes of snow--fly along the beaches.

Nov. 13-20... The traditional date for Indian Summer to take place--what will the temperature be this year?

Nov. 19... Pine Siskins are coming to feeding stations.

Nov. 21... Late Barn and Tree Swallows were still present--will they be present again this year?

Nov. 23... The full Beaver Moon shines on a cold night.

Nov. 25... Pine groves are a good place to look for owls who roost there by day.

Nov. 27... Even for "birders" a day when birds are eaten instead of watched.

Nov. 28... Greater Scaup--the most abundant diving duck we have--can be found by the hundreds in some rivers.

Nov. 30... The Snowy Owl--looking like a large mound of snow--may show up in fields or along beaches.



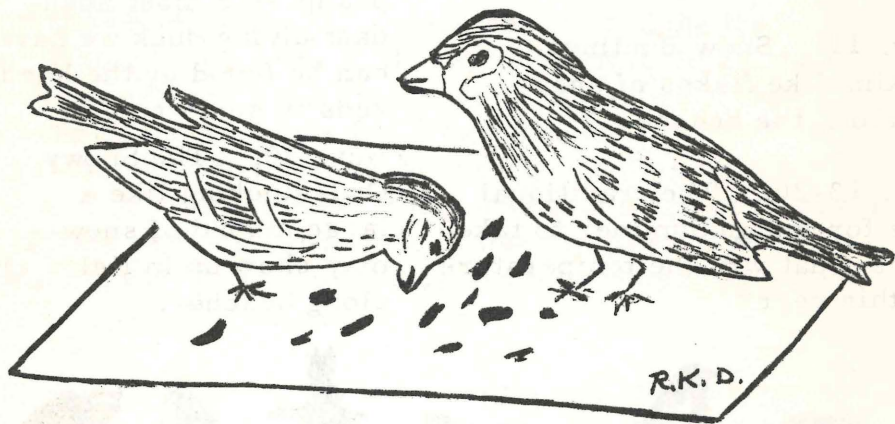
FOOTNOTES TO NATURE

by MARY JEAN DEWIRE

During the past few years, many people who feed the birds may have noticed a new visitor coming to their feeders. Known as the house finch, this sparrow-sized bird loves sunflower seeds and is often confused with the purple finch.

Slightly smaller in size, the male house finch can most easily be distinguished from the purple finch by its deeper red coloring on the head, throat, chest, and rump patch and its streaked sides and belly. The females of the two species are very similar in their streaked gray-brown coloration, but the female house finch can be identified by the absence of the white line over the eye that is obvious on the female purple finch.

The house finches, also called western linnets, are natives of the western United States and Mexico where they are abundant around ranches and small towns. The story behind their arrival here on the East Coast is an interesting one.



In 1940, these birds were illegally trapped in California and brought to New York City to be sold as caged birds called "Hollywood finches". When the pet shop owners discovered they could be prosecuted under the International Migratory Bird Treaty Act for having these birds in their possession, they released them on Long Island.

Despite being dumped from captivity into a strange environment, the house finches have succeeded in adapting to their new habitat. In April, 1941, the first adult house finch, a male, was sighted at Jones Beach, New York, and a year later the first nest was discovered in Babylon, Long Island. By 1958, they were considered established on western Long Island, in Westchester County, and in southwestern Connecticut.

Here in southeastern Connecticut, the first house finches, a pair of them, were observed by Mr. Dewire at his feeding station on April 19, 1964. Since then they have successfully nested locally and last year's Christmas Count recorded 118 in the New London area and 87 in the Old Lyme-Saybrook area with this year's totals expected to be even higher. Further evidence of their successful establishment on the East Coast is available through other 1968 Christmas Counts in which house finches were reported as far north as Cape Ann, Massachusetts and southward to the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia.

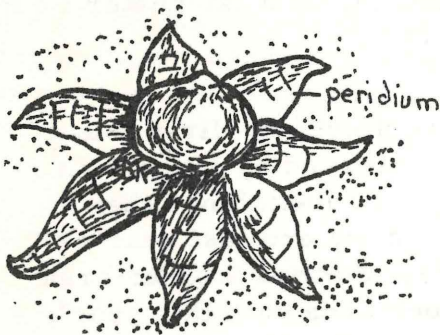
It is expected that the house finches will become even more common in the coming years so if you have a feeding station be sure to watch for these immigrants from the West.

ALONG THE SHORE

by BARBARA KASHANSKI

THE EARTHSTAR

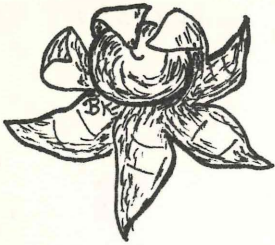
On your way to the beach you may find a very unusual and beautiful member of the mushroom family -- the water-measuring Earthstar. If the weather is wet you might not realize you are looking at a mushroom. "Is it a plant or animal?", you ask yourself.



The first time I found this odd species of puffball on a sandy spot by the stream in our yard I wasn't sure what I had found. Here was a round brownish ball about an inch across with rays like a starfish coming out all around it. I didn't even

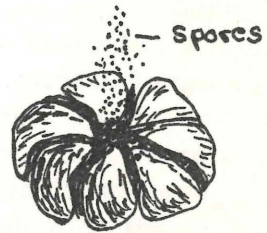
know what kind of book to start looking in to find out what this strange object was. When I finally tracked it down in a mushroom book I discovered I had found another real "wonder of nature".

The water-measuring earthstar changes its shape with the weather, which gives it its English name as well as its Latin name *Geaster (earthstar)-hygrometricus* (water-measuring). I know you have found puffballs if you like to walk in the woods. The earthstar is a puffball that is covered with a protective outer coat called a peridium.



When the weather is wet, the peridium opens up and the points lie flat on the ground or curl slightly under the ball and anchor the earthstar in place.

When the weather is dry, the outer coat hardens and curls up and closes. The earthstar is then the shape of a ball and the wind rolls it about releasing the spores in the top of the pouch.



Earthstar closed

By having the earthstar remain in one place in bad weather, nature has made sure the spores of this little puffball do not escape until the weather conditions are just right.

Earthstars can be found back in the dune area of a beach or in the woods and fields where there is sandy soil. Be on the lookout for this fair weather traveler--it is as pretty as its name.

ROCK HOUNDS

by JERRY THEILER

CALCITE

Calcite is an interesting and important mineral. It is number three on the hardness scale and is about as hard as a copper penny.

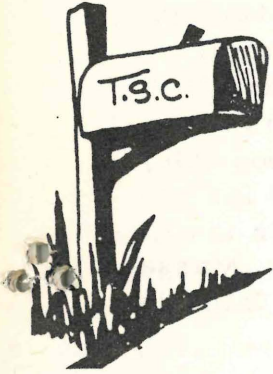
Almost all limestone and marble rocks are made up of calcite. These rocks form from shells such as clams and oysters. As coral and shells die, the parts left drop to the ocean bottom and form layers that are often very thick. The shells are then pressed together to form the rocks limestone and marble. For this reason there are often fossils in the calcite-formed rocks.

Usually calcite is white or yellow, but often it is tinted other colors such as pink or brown. Large crystals of calcite found in some areas make it an interesting collecting specimen.

Calcite is easy to recognize if a few simple tests are used. First, calcite is easily scratched with a knife.. Calcite will also bubble vigorously in weak hydrochloric acid or strong vinegar.

Next month's article will deal with the formation of underground caves and caverns due to the weathering of calcite.

ARTICLES OF ADULT INTEREST



We welcome notice of Conservation activities or problems for inclusion in this section of the Naturalist's Notebook. . . . Please let us know of your local activity so that others may be aware of your efforts and lend their support where possible. . . .

FINE FOR POLLUTION: The March 1969 issue of "Today's Health" came up with an interesting bit of information. It noted that there are two laws, which are still in effect, entitled the Federal Refuse Act of 1899 and Federal River and Harbor Act of 1888 which provide for fines from \$250 to \$2,5000 for polluting rivers or any navigable waters in the United States. Of this amount, the Acts say, one half of the fine collected shall be paid to the person documenting and reporting the pollution situation.

FOR AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHERS: The Science Center is always looking for illustrations for the Newsletter. We encourage you as members to submit any black and white photographs that you may have of a natural subject. Flowers, birds, reptiles, scenery, and many other items would be suitable. They would be used to illustrate articles or for the front or back cover. Proper credit will be given.

WETLANDS: Connecticut's new Act for the Preservation of Wetlands and Tidal Marsh and Estuarine Systems became law on October 1st. Under this act no regulated activity may legally take place on a tidal wetland such as dredging, filling and erection of structures, unless a permit is obtained from the Commissioner of Agricultural and Natural Resources. Violators of the law are punished by by substantial penalties. They are held liable to the State for the cost of restoration (to the extent possible) and shall forfeit a sum not to exceed \$1, 000. 00 for each offense. Each day of a continuing violation is a separate offense. Connecticut now joins Maine, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island in preserving their valuable salt marshes.

SPECIAL BANDING PROGRAM: On Sunday afternoon November 23rd, Science Center members will have a chance to see a bird banding station in operation. First done last spring, the program was very successful and is being repeated. The banding will be done continuously from 1:00 to 4:00 P.M. at the Peace Sanctuary on River Road in Mystic. People may come at any time during this period and stay for as long as they want. Birds will be trapped and banded allowing onlookers to see just how the work is done. Mr. Dewire will also answer any questions that might arise concerning the work. If you find yourself in the Mystic area on Nov. 23rd stop by and watch. It will be a rewarding experience for you.

MEMBERSHIP: The membership of the Science' Center is one of its most important parts. Income from it help run its daily operation and programs. While the Center's membership is at an all-time high, it must continue to grow in order to improve and increase its programs. As members one of the best contributions you can make to the Center is to contact friends and get them to become members. We currently have about 750 members, but should have over 1, 000. We therefore ask for your help. If half our current members could get a family or individual to join, it would put us well over the 1, 000 mark.

YOUR OWN NATURE JAUNT

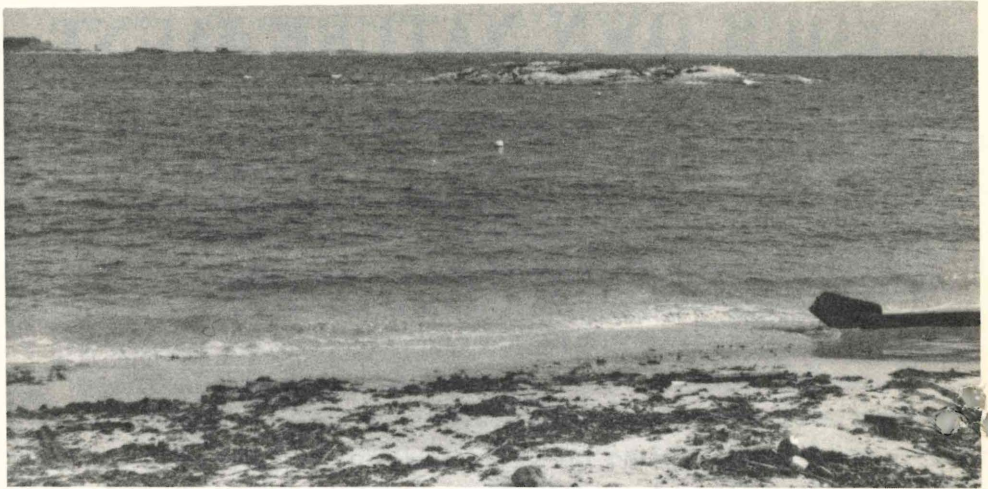
by BOB DEWIRE

THE OPEN WATER

While this subject takes in a large variety of habitat from a small pond to the open waters of Long Island Sound, the number of animals to be seen is reduced to the water birds. Cold weather has driven most of the animals into hibernation or to seek warmer waters. For a person interested in seeing the water birds, this is a good time to go. The hunting season is underway at this time, and in areas where hunting is allowed there is little to be seen. It is best to go to State Parks or other areas where hunting is not permitted.

In the open sound will be such birds as the large common loon and the smaller horned grebe. Both spend the summers to the north of us, but winter along our coast. They are expert divers, and back when they were hunted it was said that when a hunter fired a gun at them, if they saw the flash of the muzzle, they would be under the water before the bullet reached them.

The true sea ducks will be found in the Sound's often rough waters. All are diving ducks and seem to delight in riding the white caps. The three scoters -- surf, (all black with white patches on the head from which it gets its common name "skunkhead"), white-winged, (all black with large white wing patches), and common (all black, the males with a bright orange lobe on the bill), are all masters at riding the surf. Two other ducks, the common goldeneye and the red-breasted merganser will often join them.



Moving into large rivers we find ducks that seem to prefer the quieter waters. Large flocks or "rafts" of scaup ducks often sleep and dive for food just offshore. Mixed into their flocks will often be canvasbacks and the rarer redheads, both with red-orange heads which stand out from the blackish head of the scaup.

A favorite with most people are the small black and white ducks called buffleheads. They seem forever playing, the males puffing up and displaying for the females who could care less and all of them constantly diving and chasing each other around.

In small fresh water ponds and far up in the headwaters of coves and rivers will be birds that favor fresh water rather than salt. These include the American or common merganser, the largest duck to be found in this area, and the striking hooded merganser. Mallards and black ducks are always abundant here. Less common would be pied-billed grebes, green-winged teal, and ring necked ducks, but a little careful searching should reveal them.

All total there are 2 species of loons, 2 grebes, 2 cormorants, 1 swan, 2 geese and 21 ducks which can be found within New London County during the winter. See if you can locate and identify all of them this year.

CONNECTICUT CREATURES

by MIKE WALKER

Last Spring while I was hiking through a section of the Meshomasic State Forest I was startled by a large brown bird that exploded into flight from the forest floor only a few feet in front of me. I walked forward slowly, keeping my eyes on the spot where the bird had been. There, at the base of a small pine tree, a dozen white eggs lay cupped in a vine shrouded nest on the ground. The nest was so carefully concealed that I doubt that I could have found it again after walking on for only a few hundred yards.

The nest belonged to the Eastern Ruffed Grouse, or Partridge, one of the most popular game birds in the East. This large brown bird resembles a pullet in both size and shape. It has a wide, fan-shaped tail with a black border near the end and the male bird sports a thick black ruff around the base of his neck.

During the Spring the male Grouse stages a unique display. Standing erect on a log or tussock of grass, he raises his wings until they almost touch over his back. Then, slowly at first, but with rapidly increasing speed, the bird beats the air with his wings. This produces a deep-toned thumping sound that quickly increases in tempo. This woodland drum roll is one of the most distinctive sounds of Connecticut's forests, and once heard is never

forgotten. The drumming evidently serves to attract females as well as challenge rival males.

The female Grouse constructs a bowl-like nest depressed into the forest floor, and there 7-17 eggs are brooded. When the chicks hatch they are able to run about almost immediately, and they quickly leave the nest. While they develop flight feathers, the young birds rely on protective coloration and concealment to elude enemies.

During the spring and summer, Grouse feed on a wide range of insects supplemented by tender shoots of young plants and grass. In the fall and winter, they eat the fruits, berries, seeds, and twigs of many woodland plants.



Photo by Alvah Sanborn, Nat. Aud. Soc.

FIELD NOTES

Sept. 15 - Oct. 15

Forre-Saybrook: SNOW GEESE were reported with a large flock of CANADA GEESE on Sept. 26th. A PIGEON HAWK was present at Great Island on Sept. 21st and an immature BALD EAGLE was seen on the Connecticut River at Lord's Point on the 22nd. Those people who went on the Science Center's Griswold Point field trip on Sept. 27th were treated to a fine migration of hawks that included several SPARROW HAWKS, a RED-TAILED HAWK, and the rare COOPER'S HAWK. Also seen were a WHIMBREL and PALM WARBLER. The first MYRTLE WARBLER was reported from Smith's Neck on the 27th.

Niantic, Waterford, and New London: A RED-THROATED LOON has been on the Niantic River during early October. The red throat patch is still evident. Warblers were reported late into the Fall with CANADA, BLACK-THROATED BLUE, PARULA, and REDSTARTS still present in early October. KINGLETS arrived from the North during this period with the first GOLDEN-CROWNED present at the Arboretum on Sept. 22nd and a RUBY-CROWNED reported at Magonk Point on the 24th. WHITE-THROATED SPARROWS and SLATE-COLORED JUNCOS were in the woods by Sept. 30th and WHITE-THROATS were at a feeder in Waterford on Oct. 8th. SHARP-SHINNED HAWKS were migrating at Harkness Memorial Park on Oct. 4th where 2 COMMON EGRETS and a GREEN HERON were still present. The first WATER PIPIT was seen at Harkness on Oct. 4th and a VESPER SPARROW was there on Oct. 11th.

Mystic and Stonington: WHITE-THROATED SPARROWS arrived in Ledyard on Sept. 22nd. Late migrants in this area included BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER (Oct. 11th), OVENBIRD (Oct. 5th), BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER (Oct. 7th), and a SOLITARY VIREO (Oct. 6th). A SCARLET TANAGER was still in Ledyard on Oct. 4th. A RED-HEADED WOODPECKER was seen on Shewville Road on Oct. 13th. COOT arrived on the Mystic River on Oct. 4th. A CLAPPER RAIL was seen on a mudflat along the Mystic River at the Peace Sanctuary on Oct. 12th. Barn Island continued to be productive with the following reports: Sept. 27th--2 COOT and 2 COMMON GALLINULES; Sept. 28th--a female PINTAIL, SHARP-SHINNED HAWKS, and flocks of MYRTLE WARBLERS; Oct. 5th-3 WHITE-CROWNED SPARROWS, a female SHOVELER, a flock of 30 GREATER YELLOWLEGS, a HERMIT THRUSH, and 3 PECTORAL SAND-PIPERS. Over 1,000 CORMORANTS were on two rock islands off Noank Point on Oct. 14th.

Rhode Island Shoreline: 15 BLACK SKIMMERS flew along the shore at Weekapaug on Oct. 4th, and 3 were at Napatree Pt. on Oct. 10th. A LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE and CLAPPER RAIL were also reported from there. Eight SNOWY EGRETS were still there on Sept. 26th. A GREEN HERON and a COMMON EGRET were still at Weekapaug on Oct. 5th. At Quonochontaug, migrant ducks were noted on Oct. 5th. Among them were SURF and WHITE-WINGED SCOTERS and RED-BREASTED MERGANSERS. A rare WESTERN KINGBIRD was on a telephone wire on the road to Moonstone Beach and a GOLDEN PLOVER was in the potato fields there on Sept. 24th. A GLOSSY IBIS was at Galilee on Oct. 9th and a flock of GREATER SCAUP was reported from Point Judith.

Contributors to this column were: Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth Bates, Grace Bissell, Lawrence Brooks, Mrs. Charles Chapin, James Clark, Bob & Mary Jean Dewire, Mrs. Philip Dewire, Mr. & Mrs. Frank Eastman, Helen Gilman, Rick Holloway, Mary Laffargue, Eloise Saunders, Paul Spitzer, and William Willetts.

ACTIVITIES FOR NOVEMBER

- November 8 -- 8:30 A.M. Rocky Neck State Park.
A trip through the marshland and beach areas to observe migrating waterfowl. Meet at the main parking lot.
- November 15 -- 10:00 A.M. A Junior Workshop for members in Grades 4, 5, and 6.
"Caring for Animals in a Museum".
Advance registration required. Limit 10 children.
- November 16 -- 3:00 P.M. The first Family Film Festival of the season to be held in the auditorium of the Lyman Allyn Museum. Featured will be "Wetlands Are Not Wastelands" and Walt Disney's "Prowlers of The Everglades". Free to members. Non-members are asked for a 50¢ donation.
- November 23 -- 1:00-4:00 P.M. A special demonstration program of a bird banding station at the Peace Sanctuary. See page 10 for further details.

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ROBERT DEWIRE
Editor

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